

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 11 March, 2018

National Get Over It Day

March 9th is National Get Over It Day. Created in 2005 by a man trying to get over his ex, it is strategically placed between Valentines Day and April Fools. This is a sermon about

letting the past be past and coming into the present;
 transmuting suffering into compassion and action;
 and leaning in to the future.

For most of us, it's not hard to think of some emotional baggage we're hauling around that confused, frightened, angered, hurt, or devastated us. We're carrying it — we cling to it — and we don't put it down. Why?

* Maybe it's because we believe it's what made us who we are.

* Maybe we can't imagine who we would be without the armor we put on to protect ourselves from something like that ever happening to us again.

* Maybe we believe that the baggage, the armor, are only things keeping us connected to who or what hurt us. I call this misery the economy of grudge-bearing.

* Or maybe we believe if we could just get closure, we could move on. I like the theory, but even when it's possible, closure is often — if not always — deeply flawed. Wanting to understand what went wrong and *why* can be a little like running into a burning house to find out how the fire started.¹ We may and may not get our answers, and we'll always get burned in the process.

It turns out that baggage and that armor are literally heavy. In a study published in 2014,² forty-six participants were divided into two groups. Both groups wrote about a time someone wronged them. The first group wrote about a time they forgave the person; the other group wrote about a time they did not.

¹ Please see myflr.org/national-get-over-it-day/

² Ryan Fehr, assistant professor of management at the University of Washington, in *Social Psychological Personality Science*

Afterwards, all the participants were led outside, asked to gaze at a large hill, and guess how steep it was. The unforgiving group judged the hill about five degrees steeper than the forgiving group did. Then they were asked to jump up and down. The forgiving group jumped an average of seven centimeters higher than the unforgiving group.

Professor Ryan Fehr, an author of the study, concluded that a grudge can literally weigh us down. “If you’re primed with having a heavy burden, it makes you feel heavy,” he says. “The metaphor becomes real life.”

Fortunately, we have a choice about it — a choice about whether or not we spend time and energy on what we can’t change about the past. It’s us to us whether or not we choose joy, after all.

At the Arlington Street Zen Center, we like to tell this old Buddhist teaching tale from Chinese mystic Chuang Tzu: A man is enjoying himself, paddling his boat at dusk. In the distance, he sees another boat coming down the river. It becomes clear that whoever is paddling that boat doesn’t see him; it’s coming right at him. He calls out to the man, waves his arms, and shouts, “Watch out! Watch out!”

Suddenly, c-r-u-n-c-h — the boat collides with his.

He’s furious! He’s yelling at the other guy, cursing and calling him names. And then ... he looks more closely. *The other boat is empty.*

Immediately, he stops his fuss. The boat had slipped its mooring and was carried by the current of the river. *There was no one to blame.* Why would anyone in their right mind yell at an empty boat?

*

So much of what happens to us — confusing, frightening, angering, hurtful, devastating — is not personal. Marshall Goldsmith, author of *Triggers*, says the moral of Chuang Tzu’s story is, “There’s never anyone in the other boat. We are always [yelling] at an empty vessel.”³

Chances are good that no one gets up in the morning setting out to ruin our day. Even when we are the intended object of bad behavior, there is often much, so much, that we can’t understand about what would drive someone to behave the

³ Ken Blanchard, *Are You Yelling at an Empty Boat?*, 11/16/16. Please see clomedia.com/2016/11/16/yelling-empty-boat/

way they're behaving. And even when we can't quite muster compassion, we can do our best to get out of the way, and say, "Empty boat." When we don't, the only person who is punished is looking at us in the mirror.

The past is past. This is the new normal. There are many ways to metabolize our grief, and then, at best, we move on.

Our young neighbor, Luke, was born to a wildly athletic and outdoorsy family. Luke has cerebral palsy; absent significant scientific advances, he will always get around in an electric wheelchair. Without missing a beat, his mother, our friend Sally, shared this beautiful piece called *Welcome to Holland*, written in 1987 by American author and activist Emily Perl Kingsley. I suspect it's perfect for most parents. It says, in part, "When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation to Italy. You buy a bunch of guide books and make ... wonderful plans: the Coliseum, the Sistine Chapel, gondolas. You may learn some handy phrases in Italian. It's all very exciting. After ... months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives.

"You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The [flight attendant] comes [on] and says, 'Welcome to Holland!'

"'Holland?' you say. 'What do you mean, Holland? I signed up for Italy.... All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy.... I'm supposed to be in Italy.' But there's been a change in the flight plan. You've landed in Holland....

"So you must go out and buy new guidebooks. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you never would have met. It's just a different place....

"[Meanwhile,] everyone you know is coming and going from Italy, and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there.... Yes, that's where I was supposed to go.... The loss of that dream is a ... significant loss.... [But] after you've been [in Holland] for a while, ... you look around. You begin to notice that Holland has windmills ... and tulips. Holland even has Rembrandts. [And] if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, ... very lovely things about Holland."

*

National Get Over It Day begs the question of things we'll never get over — horrific things, like slavery and the Holocaust and so many fundamentally unforgivable things with which we need to learn to live. In 1999, I met Nozipho, a

South African activist who had spent many years in prison. I was sitting with her one day when, out of the blue, she said to me, “Kim, do you know who my best friend is? My best friend is the man who was my jailer.”

As I tried to parse her words, she continued. “We have seen each other at our worst. In apartheid, we both lost our humanity; no one knows the suffering we shared. We were doing our part, each of us doing what we thought was best. He can’t give me back what was taken, but whatever I need, now, he provides. Me, I give him forgiveness. It is necessary for both of us.”

Nelson Mandela spent 27 years as a prisoner. One of his guards was Christo Brand. “Christo Brand was 18 years old, fresh from the farmlands of the Afrikaner hinterland when, in 1978, he was sent to Robben Island as a prison warden. He had been warned he would be guarding the most dangerous of terrorists. To his surprise, Prisoner 46664, then aged 60, asked him about his family, his upbringing, his fears for the future. ‘There was no color barrier between us,’ said Brand, now [58].... ‘Like me, Mandela came from a farm. He was a human being. We understood that we shared the same sky and the same air.... [And] when I had a problem, he would give me advice.’

“When [Mandiba] was eventually freed ... Brand was bereft. ‘... The prison,’ [he says,] ‘was empty for me [then]...’ Even today, he still finds [it] wondrous how Mandela was able to transform their relationship. ‘He was my prisoner,” he [says]. ‘But he was my father.’⁴

On his release, Nelson Mandela said, “I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.”

At the heart of getting over it is that wildly elusive gesture of heart and mind: *surrender*. Surrender means giving up any hope that the past can be different. Surrender means letting go of all thoughts of revenge — because revenge is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. Surrender is the path to peace that passes all understanding. American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a prayer about that which many of us know by heart. We can’t say it often enough:

G*d, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
 Courage to change the things I can,
 And the wisdom to know the difference.

⁴ Please see world.time.com/2013/12/06/mandelas-jailer-he-was-my-prisoner-but-he-was-my-father/

Beloved spiritual companions,

May we let the past be past,
come into the present;
transmute suffering into compassion and action;
and lean in to the future.

Baggage and armor are heavy.
We can choose to lay them down.

Let us release ourselves from prison,
and surrender.

The boat is empty.

May we find ourselves in Holland,
and find joy.